

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

other names/site number B'nai Israel Synagogue

2. Location

street & number 618 Mynster Street N/A ☐ not for publication

city or town Council Bluffs ☐ vicinity

state Iowa code IA county Pottawattamie code 155 zip code 51501

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ see continuation sheet for additional comments).

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

☐ entered in the National Register.

☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the
National Register.

☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the
National Register.

☐ removed from the National
Register.

☐ other, (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Name of Property

Pottawattawie County, IA
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	
	buildings
	sites
	structures
	objects
1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19th AND EARLY 20th CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls BRICK

roof ASPHALT

other STONE

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Name of Property

Pottawattamie County, IA
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

☒ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ **B** removed from its original location.

☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property.

☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested

☐ previously listed in the National Register

☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register

☐ designated a National Historic Landmark

☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____

☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

RELIGION

SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance

1931-1956

Significant Dates

1931

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Jensen, Jocheis Chris

Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office

☐ Other State agency

☐ Federal agency

☐ Local government

☐ University

☐ Other

Name of repository: _____

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Name of Property

Pottawattami county, IA
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	[1][5]	[2][6][1][0][3][9]	[4][5][7][1][8][4][5]	2	[1][5]	[0][0][0][0][0][0]	[0][0][0][0][0][0]
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
3	[1][5]	[0][0][0][0][0][0]	[0][0][0][0][0][0]	4	[1][5]	[0][0][0][0][0][0]	[0][0][0][0][0][0]

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Leah D. Rogers/Consultant and Megan Masana/Research Assistant

organization Tallgrass Historians L.C. date July 19, 2006

street & number 2460 S. Riverside Drive telephone 319-354-6722

city or town Iowa City state IA zip code 52246

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the complete form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name B'nai Israel Synagogue

street & number 618 Mynster Street telephone 712- 322-4705

city or town Council Bluffs state IA zip code 51501

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service****National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**Section number 7 Page 1**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA****Narrative Description**

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was built in 1931 on the site of the original 1904 synagogue, which burned to the ground on March 5, 1930. The new synagogue occupied the same lot on the north side of Mynster Street between N. 6th and N. 7th streets in the City of Council Bluffs, Iowa. The location is one block north of West Broadway, which is the major east-west historic thoroughfare through the city. The synagogue was built in a largely residential neighborhood in the Mynster Addition to the original town plat. This neighborhood was settled early in the town's history but suffered from chronic flooding along Indian Creek until the creek was channelized underground in the late 1930s just one-half block south of the synagogue. The nominated property includes the 1931 synagogue building and an attached rear and northeast corner addition that was made to the building in the early 1960s. While the addition is modern in look, its placement at the rear of the main building has had a low impact on the overall integrity of the historic building and does not block the main public views of the historic property. In order to build the 1960s addition, the lot adjacent to the east was added to the synagogue property and a dwelling on that lot was torn down. Today, the property encompasses two narrow lots, with the historic building on the west lot and part of the 1960s addition on the rear of the east lot and extending behind the synagogue and abutting the rear lot line. The rest of the east lot is now a grassy lawn. A concrete sidewalk is across the front of the synagogue and extends along the east side up to the entryway into the stairwell of the 1960s addition, which provides the interior connection to the historic building. The surrounding neighborhood is rapidly losing a number of historic buildings, with parking lots taking over now-vacant lots. Still extant to the west are two older houses, with several houses remaining to the north, and a historic apartment building to the northeast. To the south across Mynster is a large open lot where a historic apartment building stood until recently when it was razed to make yet another parking lot. The modern First Christian Church occupies the block to the east.

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is a two-story rectangular brick building that exhibits a rather eclectic stylistic influence reflecting the early twentieth century American movements in commercial and public architecture but is not a high style example attributable to any one single style of architecture. While exhibiting some classical components in the simplified form of the entablature and galvanized iron cornice around the parapet and in some of the original interior details such as the pedimented design of the ark and the pilasters, the overall feel of the building's design is one of subdued simplicity and a box-like feel. The building does feature a somewhat monumental projecting front entryway that is raised above street level and reached by a wide set of concrete steps leading up to three single doors. Above the doors are two inset panels with the Star of David on a blue background, with the third, central panel being a representation of the tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed in Hebrew with Stars of David above. Brick pilasters with stone caps flank each of the three entry doors and the stepped parapet above the entryway. On the second floor above the projecting entryway are three windows matching the placement of the doors below. These 6/6 double-hung windows with opaque colored glass are original to the construction as are the windows in the basement level on the sides. To either side of the projecting entryway are two additional doors at ground level. Inset brick panels above these side doors are original to the building's design. The roofline of the building is a stepped parapet with concrete coping on the façade wrapping around both sides of the building.

The cornerstone is on the southeast corner of the building and is the original stone from the earlier synagogue, which burned in 1930. The inscription on the two exposed faces of the stone reads as follows:

C.B.Y.
Aug. 10, 1930
Council Bluffs, IA

C.B.Y.
June 19, 1904
Council Bluffs, IA

The walls of the synagogue are load-bearing brick, with the exterior brick an interesting polychrome rough-cast brick that imparts a deep rich texture to the exterior wall surface. The trim around the doors and windows and the panels on the façade are of stone, while the coping around the roofline and the front steps are concrete.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 **Page** 2

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

In the early 1960s, the congregation decided to expand the existing facilities rather than building new. They hired local architect, I.T. Carrithers, to design a new addition to the historic building. The original concept would have resulted in a modern addition to the front as well as the rear of the building; however, in the end, only the rear addition was constructed. This addition is of concrete block side-wall construction, with curtain walls of metal-framed glass windows in between. The concrete blocks on the side wall portions of the new addition are inset in patterns of five Stars of David on both the exterior and interior walls. The new addition has two levels but is lower in height than the historic building. It is set back to the rear of the building and lot to the point that it has a low impact on the overall integrity of the historic building.

The only other modifications to the exterior of the historic building in the modern era has been the replacement of double sets of windows (two windows over two windows) on the east and west sides, the infill of the center double set of windows, and the replacement of the front doors with solid doors. Originally, the front doors featured glass panes, which had to be replaced for security reasons because the synagogue has been burglarized and vandalized in the modern era.

The interior of the historic building features two floors and a balcony level. The main floor is the sanctuary, which is open to the roof level, with a balcony on the south end, which is reached by a set of stairs in the main entryway of the building. Originally, the plan of the sanctuary featured a balcony that wrapped around three sides of the interior on the south, west, and north sides, with only the original south balcony remaining in place. The original layout of the main floor had a central podium, or bema, from which the Torahs were read and services conducted. The ark, which holds the Torah scrolls in a monumental, classical wood-paneled cabinet, was centered on the east wall of the sanctuary. The layout of the original seating on the main floor is not known as it was not depicted on the original blueprint; however, tradition would have the seats facing the east and the ark. The men sat on the main floor, while the women and children occupied the balcony level. In later years, the women began sitting down on the main floor with the men to the point that the tradition of separation was eventually discontinued altogether. Because of this break with tradition, much of the balcony was no longer needed resulting in the decision to remove two-thirds of the balcony during the 1960s remodeling.

When the new addition was made to the synagogue in the early 1960s, the plans also included a remodeling of the interior of the sanctuary and the basement level. The result was the current configuration and design of the interior, which in the sanctuary involved the moving of the ark to an angled position in the northeast corner of the sanctuary and the construction of a raised podium or stage across the north end. Padded wooden benches featuring inset Stars of David on the ends were placed in parallel rows in a north-south orientation on either side of a center aisle and facing north towards the podium and the ark. The south balcony remained in place but the other two balconies were completely removed. The seats in the south balcony are the original decorative cast metal and wood theater-type seats with leather padded seats that fold up. A lowered acoustical ceiling was also added during this remodeling along with new light fixtures and decorative wood panels and metal symbols on the main walls of the sanctuary. Along the wood paneling of the west wall are sets of bronze memorial plaques.

The ark is of a classical design featuring dark wood paneling, classical pilasters, and louvered doors that cover the cabinet where the Torah scrolls are kept behind a velvet portiere. The congregation is blessed with seven Torahs, which escaped some harm when burglars broke into the ark and stole the silver crowns but left the scrolls behind. Two of the Torahs were saved from the 1904 synagogue when it burned down, with the others acquired through donation.

The basement level of the historic building originally housed a large meeting room, four school rooms, a men's toilet, a women's toilet, a boiler room, and a fuel room. In the 1960s remodeling, the interior partitions were removed, with a large social hall now occupying most of the basement area along with a large industrial kitchen.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 **Page** 3 **Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

The basement level of the 1960s addition features a chapel that has a smaller wood-paneled ark but which does not currently contain a Torah. Additional memorial plaques on the chapel walls include several original plaques from the synagogue. The upper level of the new addition contains the rabbi's office, several class and meeting rooms, restrooms, and a utility room.

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue maintains good integrity despite the 1960s addition and interior remodeling and still imparts a strong sense of time and place of this Jewish synagogue in City of Council Bluffs. The building retains much of the original exterior material and significant interior components, such as the original ark, strong evidence of the original design and workmanship details, and maintains its historic association with the older residential neighborhood in which it was built despite the loss of a number of buildings in the vicinity. In fact, the more that is lost of this once historic neighborhood, the more significant the survival of this historic synagogue becomes.

This nomination is being set forth by the B'nai Israel Congregation to recognize the significance of this building and its place in the Council Bluffs community but also to help preserve this building for future generations. Historical information and photographs were provided by Sandra Kurland of B'nai Israel as well as by the Nebraska Jewish Historical Society of Omaha.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 **Page** 4

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

Statement of Significance

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is locally significant under Criterion C as a notable example of a public building design by Council Bluffs architect, J. Chris Jensen. It is also considered locally significant under Criterion A for the significant association of this building with the historical settlement and evolution of the Jewish religious and ethnic community in the Council Bluffs-Omaha vicinity. The period of significance for the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is from 1931, when the synagogue was built, until 1956, the 50-year mark for National Register consideration. During this period, the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation saw its greatest expansion and success in the community. The synagogue is considered to qualify under Criteria Consideration A as religious property which derives its significance from both its architectural distinction and its historical importance in the Council Bluffs community.

Architectural Significance of the Synagogue

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was designed by local architect, J. Chris Jensen, in a subdued yet somewhat stylish early twentieth century public architectural design. This comparatively small-scale, box-like building is very reminiscent of commercial building designs of the day but also connects with the past in the use of simplified classical elements, particularly in the design of the original interior. Jensen's design for the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was stylish, functional, and practical. Feeling the economic downturn of the Great Depression, the congregation was strapped for funds, so a large new building on a larger site was beyond their means. The comparatively small scale of the building allowed the congregation to use their original site and kept the expense of the new building to a minimum. Jensen's design for this synagogue successfully adapted to the constraints of the lot and provided ample interior space for the congregation's immediate needs. The design and size worked for another 30 years before the needs of the growing congregation and a desire for modernization resulted in the early 1960s addition and remodeling of the interior. In the process, however, Jensen's original exterior design was left largely intact. As a result, the building today still imparts a strong sense of time and place and is still a landmark in the neighborhood.

While the design of synagogues was never as codified as that for Christian churches, the design often followed certain principles of the faith. One of the major principles was that of simplicity, which the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue design upheld on both the exterior and interior. Historically, the main constraints on the interior design of a synagogue was the presence of an ark, which is the cabinet that holds the Torah scrolls, and a bema (or bimah), which is raised podium or platform for the reading of the Pentateuch and Torah. Orthodox congregations also required a balcony to separate the women and children from the men, who sat on the main floor. Tradition held that the bema would be located in the center of the sanctuary facing the ark, with seating arranged to also face the ark. "Historically, Jews are to face toward Jerusalem while praying, so in this country the ark is located on the east wall rather than always on the rear wall" (Naumann 2004:14).

The design of synagogue exteriors had even fewer constraints from one synagogue to the next, with the design in the United States often following popular regional styles and sometimes even styles of neighboring churches (Naumann 2004). Perhaps in the world political climate of the 1930s, it may be that blending in with the surrounding community rather than calling overt attention to their presence could have been a subtle undercurrent in synagogue design. One feature that appears to be fairly common to synagogue exterior design, and one seen in the design of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue in Council Bluffs, is the use of tripartite façade division. In some cases, the main entrance is centered on the façade, with the entry flanked by "two sides appearing almost as towers" and marking the location of cloak rooms and office spaces (ibid.:15). In the case of the Council Bluffs synagogue, the tripartite division is expressed in several ways. Specifically, the façade features a projecting main entryway that has three doors, with one door exactly in the center of the façade. This raised set of three doors is then flanked by lower doors to either side imparting a second tripartite division consisting of the projecting entry (with three doors) and the two lower side entry doors. This subdivision is further emphasized on the upper level of the façade

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 **Page** 5

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

by the set of three windows and the inset panels with the Stars of David and the Ten Commandments centered above the main entry doors.

Finally, the interior design of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue in its current configuration compared to its historic configuration reflects the evolution of the congregation from an Orthodox tradition to a Conservative one. Specifically, the removal of the bema and its replacement with a platform linking directly to the ark "is most commonly found in Conservative and Reform synagogues," and the removal of most of the balcony limited seating options primarily to the main floor further reflecting the Conservative movement, which allowed all members of the congregation to sit together (Naumann 2004).

The synagogue appears to be one of only fourteen remaining in the state of Iowa and, as such, is a rare surviving example of an active Jewish synagogue in Iowa and as a comparatively well preserved example of an early 1930s synagogue built to serve a growing congregation in the wake of a disastrous fire, which destroyed their first synagogue in the city (Naumann 2004).

The Architect

The architect who designed the 1931 Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was Jocheis Chris Jensen, more commonly referred to as "J. Chris Jensen," who was born in Denmark in 1873. He apprenticed in Denmark but appears to have had no formal education in architecture. In 1894-95 he worked for Charles Driscoll in Omaha, Nebraska, before starting his own practice in Council Bluffs in 1900. He managed his own contracting firm called Jensen Bros. Co., engaging in both architecture and construction, with offices located at 305 W. Broadway. In 1918, he was listed as president of the firm. In 1923, he joined the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and was registered by exemption in 1927. Late in his career, Jensen was in partnership with G. Bernard Larson, who took over the practice after Jensen died in the mid 1940s. "Jensen served as a member of the State Board of Architectural Examiners, at times holding office, from 1935, or possibly earlier, until his death" (Shank 1999:87). Other known works of Jensen's in Council Bluffs are the Kontinental Kompound Co. Building constructed c.1911, the Council Bluffs YMCA Building pool and gymnasium addition built in 1931, the Council Bluffs City Hall built in 1938, Thomas Jefferson High School built in 1920-22, and Bloomer Elementary School built in the 1920s-30s. Jensen and his wife, Sadie, lived at 520 Oakland Avenue, a home that he designed and built in the early 1900s on the bluff overlooking the synagogue location.

The Historical Significance of the Synagogue and Jewish Settlement in Council Bluffs

"The majority of those Jews who arrived on these shores in the 1850s and 1860s were young, single men, unencumbered by family responsibilities and thus able to travel and roam until they found a suitable livelihood" (Gendler 1968:6). As a result, many of the first Jewish settlers to come to Iowa were peddlers exploring the territories during the 1840s. A number also entered into some form of retail business in order to better adjust to a new community. The majority of these individuals established themselves in areas near forts, such as Fort Madison and Fort Des Moines. As the State of Iowa developed after 1846, Keokuk became the locus of a very successful Jewish community (*American Jewish Archives*, Vol. 8 [1956], pp. 80-81).

Most of the first wave of Jewish settlers in Iowa hailed from Eastern Europe, with the Omaha-Council Bluffs area receiving a notable number in the 1850s, many of whom had emigrated from Germany and Bohemia having escaped from political and economic upheavals in their homelands at that time. Leopold May was probably the first Jewish settler in Omaha and went into business in 1855 at a time when the population of the city did not exceed 300 persons. He also settled briefly in neighboring Council Bluffs where he opened a retail clothing store under the name of May & Weil (Gendler 1968:6). Other early Jewish settlers in Council Bluffs were Sol Bloom, A.B. Newman, and Henry Eisman. These first settlers included

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 6Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

"merchants, tailors, laborers, junkmen and peddlers...Sol Bloom established a clothing store. A.B. Newman was in dry goods, and Henry Eisman sold general merchandise" (S. Telpner n.d.; Ramsey and Shrier 2006). Others soon followed including a number who had first settled in the eastern United States, coming out west to Council Bluffs to seek the burgeoning opportunities in this by-then booming town. Among this second wave of Jewish immigrants were H. Mosler, F. Friedman, Simon Eisman, F. Hershberg, A. Goldstein, and L. Harris (*Nonpareil* 1955; Ramsey and Shrier 2002).

After 1881, escapees from pogroms in Russia began to arrive. Their letters to relatives and friends in Europe, extolling the freedom, safety and opportunity available, caused the Jewish population to grow even more (*Nonpareil* 1955).

It appears that when this third wave of immigrants landed in New York they were also encouraged to settle out west by Jewish welfare organizations intent on preventing further congestion in the port city. Omaha was among the locations immigrants were encouraged to consider. It was with this third wave of Jewish settlement that the call for an organized congregation in Council Bluffs began; however, the ties with Jewish organizations and congregations in Omaha remained strong throughout the area's history. "The Jewish population of Council Bluffs is, of course, subject to influence of nearby Omaha, and most of its members owe allegiance to at least one Omaha organization, but there are several Jewish business and professional leaders in Council Bluffs in spite of its proximity to the larger city" (Wolfe 1994:233). At one time there were over 100 Jewish-owned businesses in Council Bluffs, along with a number of professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and politicians including two who served terms as Mayor of the city.

In 1881, 25 charter members in Council Bluffs established a new congregation: the Congregation of Bikur Cholim. However, the group was so small; they could not afford to build a synagogue. Instead, they rented a small brick building near the Water Works on Main Street. The congregation was Orthodox and did not have a rabbi. However, they were still able to worship in the traditional form led by members of their all-male congregation. Even as this congregation was establishing itself, "shortly afterward, another Jewish group in the city founded a new congregation called Temple Emanuel [or in some texts the Hebrew Society], but it was only in existence a couple of years and then disbanded" (Ramsey and Shrier 2006). This Reform group was incorporated in 1882, and along with the Bikur Cholim congregation, was able to purchase "a cemetery east of the city; it was divided into two sections to be used by the reform and traditional Jewish groups" (S. Telpner n.d.).

In 1903, the orthodox Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation was organized, with a membership of fourteen men including Isaac Gilinsky, George Whitebrook, M. Frieden, M. Solomon, B. Gilinsky, Samuel Snyder, Moritz Marcus, Julius Katelman, Isaac Cherniss, Enoch Gilinsky, Sam Friedman, Joe Gilinsky, E. Pill, and a Mr. Simon. Services were held in rented quarters until a centrally accessible location could be acquired. A lot on the north side of Mynster Street in a largely residential neighborhood near the main commercial area along Broadway was selected. The cornerstone for their first synagogue was laid in 1904 at 618 Mynster Street in northwest Council Bluffs. The original structure was a wood frame building that had a front-gabled orientation with a distinctly Eastern European (or perhaps Russian?) style to its design. The building cost \$6,000. Julius Katelman and Moritz Marcus were credited with the success of the building project. Katelman owned a scrap iron business in Council Bluffs, while Marcus owned a clothing store. Because the new synagogue once again lacked the services of a fulltime rabbi, Katelman, Marcus, and other men of the congregation conducted the regular services. However, on the night of March 5, 1930, the congregation stood by helplessly as the synagogue burned to the ground. Reportedly, Louis Katelman upon seeing the fire from his store on Broadway rushed to the building and scooped up the Torah, sacred scrolls, and other religious items before the building was lost.¹ However, another version of this story has three Jewish women who lived nearby--Mrs. A. Diamond, Miss Rosie Fox, and Mrs. Charles Endleman, entering the burning synagogue to retrieve the Torah and carrying it to safety (Ramsey and Shrier 2002:265). "The estimated loss of the structure amounted to \$15,000 and the congregation had only \$3,000 in insurance" (*ibid.*).

¹ Exhibit on B'nai Israel Synagogue compiled by the Nebraska Jewish Historic Society, Omaha, Nebraska, on display at B'nai Israel Synagogue.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 7Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

During the Great Depression years of the 1930s, a number of Jewish businesses closed in Council Bluffs placing the congregation in financial straits because of the shortfall of the insurance on the building. Despite this, they managed to pull together enough funds to build a new structure on the same site. "A committee consisting of George Whitebook, S. Sykin, Maurice Hoffman, Dave Fox, and Abe Gilinsky, was selected to handle the building arrangements" (Wolfe 1994:234). They hired local architect, J. Chris Jensen to design the new synagogue. The cornerstone from the 1904 synagogue was salvaged from the ruins, with an inscription for the new synagogue added to the stone. This cornerstone was laid on August 30, 1930, during a ceremony attended by some of the most prestigious "Jews and Christians of Council Bluffs. Mayor Brown of the City addressed the crowd" (S. Telpner n.d.:4). This cornerstone "bore the dates of both buildings – June 19, 1904 for the original building, and on the other side – August 10, 1930, for the laying of the cornerstone of the new building. The cornerstone contains the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* and the *Jewish Morning Journal* of August 10, 1930. In addition, a silver dollar and the names of the congregation members and the members of the building committee are preserved in the stone" (ibid.). The building was completed on January 11, 1931, at a cost of \$26,000. It was large enough to seat 500 individuals. The new synagogue was built of brick to avoid the same fate as the old wooden building.

The congregation grew throughout the 1930s to 1960s and "by 1950, there were approximately 175 families" (M. Telpner 2002:267). Most of these families were quite influential within the community. Following World War II, the congregation began to shed some of its orthodox tradition, following instead the larger Conservative movement in the Jewish faith in the 1950s. One of the first traditions shed was the separation of men and women in the synagogue, with the women and children previously having to occupy the seats in the balcony with the men on the main floor below. The congregation also began holding Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for girls in addition to the traditional Bar Mitzvahs for boys. On November 1953, the official name of Chevra B'nai Yisroel was changed to B'nai Israel to reflect the changes in the congregation (Ramsey and Shrier 2002:265).

As the congregation grew, the size of the building became inadequate and in 1962 they hired local architect, I.T. Carrithers, to remodel and enlarge the building. The original plans called for additions to both the rear and front of the building, with only the rear addition actually constructed. The interior remodeling also originally called for a different floor plan in the sanctuary than was finally executed. Carrithers' first design shifted the ark to the northeast corner from its original location in the center of the east wall and had the main floor seating arranged in a southwest to northeast angle to directly face the new location of the ark. This design must not have met with approval as Carrithers executed a supplemental plan in August 1963 which called for the ark to be placed in the northeast corner and the seating to now be in two parallel north-south rows facing the new stage or platform along the north rear wall of the sanctuary. This change in design also reflects the evolution of the congregation from an Orthodox tradition to one more aligned with the Conservative movement as noted above. Carrithers' design also removed most of the upper balcony leaving only the south balcony intact. This removal further reflected the trend away from the Orthodox tradition as the balcony was now largely unused because the congregation could now all sit together on the main floor. This is the interior sanctuary plan that remains in place to the present day.

However, it was not long after the building was enlarged and remodeled that the size of the congregation began to take a downturn. With the departure of fulltime Rabbi Emil Klein in 1969, the Talmud Torah and the Sunday School were soon closed and by 1980 plans were being proposed to close and auction off the synagogue. Rose Katelman, whose husband had been so influential in the formation of this congregation and the continuation of the synagogue after the original building burned, led the effort to save the synagogue once again. She recruited young families from both Council Bluffs and Omaha to join the congregation. To further more additions, the congregation began to diverge even more from the Orthodox beliefs of their past adopting a more contemporary, reformed approach to religion. Beginning in 1989, under the leadership of the liberal Reconstructionist denomination led by Rabbi Sheryl Shulewitz, the congregation has experienced a rebirth. The B'nai Israel Synagogue congregation is currently led by Rabbi Ruth Ehrenstein but today once again struggles to maintain their numbers and to keep their building intact. At

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 **Page** 8

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

present the congregation numbers about twenty families.²

In addition to the individuals noted above, notable members of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation in Council Bluffs have included Dr. Sol Kutler, a local dentist who spent many years doing volunteer dental work overseas where needed; Maynard S. Telpner, a prominent lawyer and community leader, who served as Mayor in 1963; Shirley Gershun Goldstein, who bravely worked in the 1970s to rescue Soviet Jewry from persecution; Norman Cherniss, a noted journalist and sportswriter; Eugene Telpner, influential in journalism, radio and television; Leo Myerson, a noted musician for the World Radio in 1935; and Jack Edward Brain, a lawyer and congressman.³

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is one of the best extant representations of Jewish settlement and influence in the Council Bluffs community and southwest Iowa. Many of the commercial buildings once associated with this congregation have been demolished along Broadway. Other buildings associated with Jewish service organizations, such as the Jewish Community Center on S. 8th Street are no longer strongly identified in the community with their Jewish history. In fact, the property on S. 8th Street was originally a private home that was later purchased for use as the Jewish Community Center (M. Telpner 2002:267). As a result, the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue has become a lasting and prominent symbol of this Jewish heritage and continues to serve Council Bluffs' Jewish community into the twenty-first century.

² Exhibit on B'nai Israel Synagogue compiled by the Nebraska Jewish Historic Society, Omaha, Nebraska, on display at B'nai Israel Synagogue.

³ Abraham Lincoln High School Hall of Fame Inductees, list on file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

Section number 9 Page 9

Major Bibliographic References

Fielding, Julien R.

n.d. Story of Survivors: Younger Families Spark Needed to Rekindle Spirit in Bluffs Synagogue. Copy on file B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Gendler, Carol

1968 The Jews of Omaha: The First Sixty Years. Master thesis, Department of History, University of Omaha, Nebraska.

Naumann, Molly Myers

2004 B'nai Jacob Synagogue, Ottumwa, Iowa. National Register of Historic Places Nomination. On file State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Nonpareil

1955 First Jews Came to Bluffs 100 Years Ago. *Nonpareil*, January 6, 1955.

Pollak, Oliver B.

1989 *Memories of the Jewish Midwest, B'nai B'rith in Omaha: 1884-1989*. Nebraska Jewish Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska.

Ramsey, William E. and Betty Dineen Shrier

2002 *Silent Hills Speak: a History of Council Bluffs, Iowa*. Council Bluffs Public Library Foundation, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

2006 Script prepared for Speaker Series, January 13, 2006. Copy on file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Shank, Wesley I.

1999 *Iowa's Historic Architects: A Biographical Dictionary*. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City.

Telpner, Maynard S.

2002 Is Council Bluffs Jewry a Disappearing Act? In *Silent Hills Speak: a History of Council Bluffs, Iowa* by William E. Ramsey and Betty Dineen Shrier. Council Bluffs Public Library Foundation, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

1994 Outline of presentation for Kirn Jr. High School in Council Bluffs dated December 1994. Copy on file B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Telpner, Sylvia

n.d. The Last Synagogue of Council Bluffs. Copy on file B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Wolfe, Jack

1994 *A Century with Iowa Jewry, 1833-1940*. Iowa Printing Company, Des Moines.

Additional Sources:

Original blueprints from both the 1930 design by J. Chris Jensen and the early 1960s remodeling and addition by I.T. Carrithers on file at the B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Historical Exhibit on display at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa, compiled by the Nebraska Jewish Historic Society of Omaha, Nebraska.

Historical scrapbooks and photographs compiled by Sandra Kurland on file at the B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 10 Page 10

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

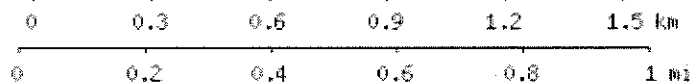
The boundary of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue consists of Lot 4 of Block 16 of the Bayliss Addition and Lot 9 of Block 7 of the Mynster Addition to the City of Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Boundary Justification

The boundary of the nominated property consists of the original lot on which the historic synagogue is built and the adjacent lot on which the 1960s addition was partially built.

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

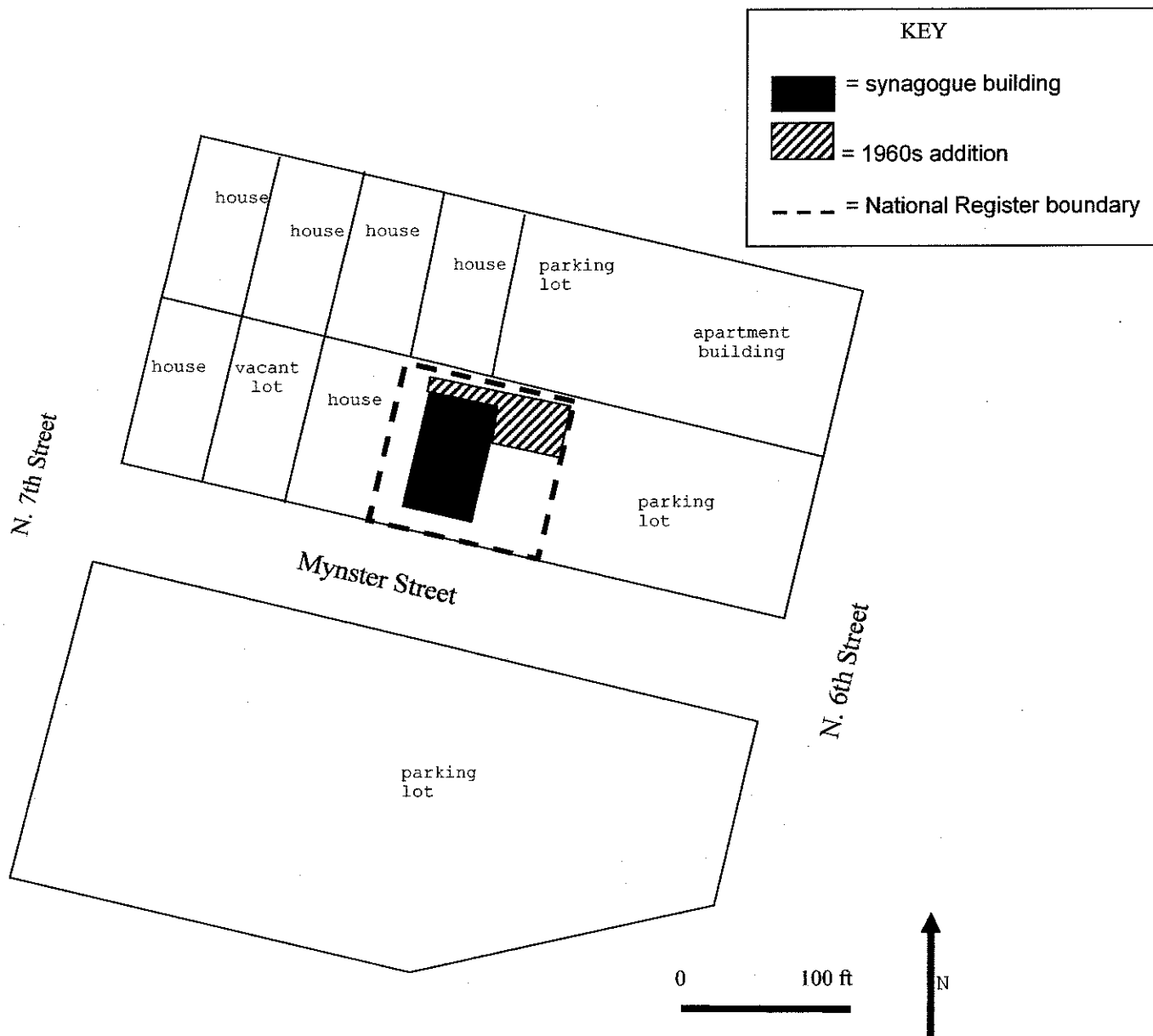
[illegible]

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Additional Documentation Page 12 **Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue**
Pottawattamie County, IA

Site Plan Map



Additional
Section number Documentation Page 13

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

[illegible]

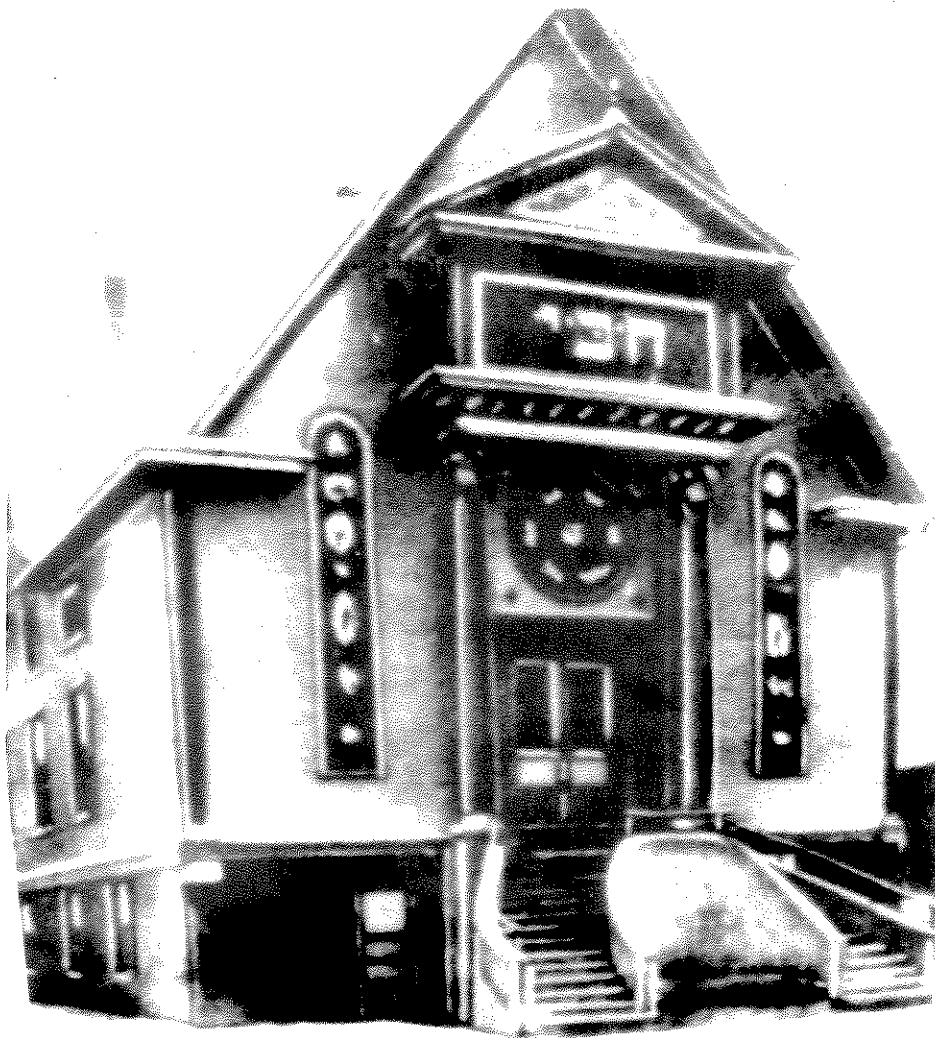
**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number Additional Documentation Page 14

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

Photograph of 1904 Synagogue at site of current Synagogue
Original photograph from the Omaha Jewish Community Center Archives
Photocopy provided by Sandra Kurland, Council Bluffs, Iowa



**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number Additional Documentation **Page** 15

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

Photograph of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue in the 1930s-40s, View to the NE
Copy provided by the Nebraska Jewish Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska

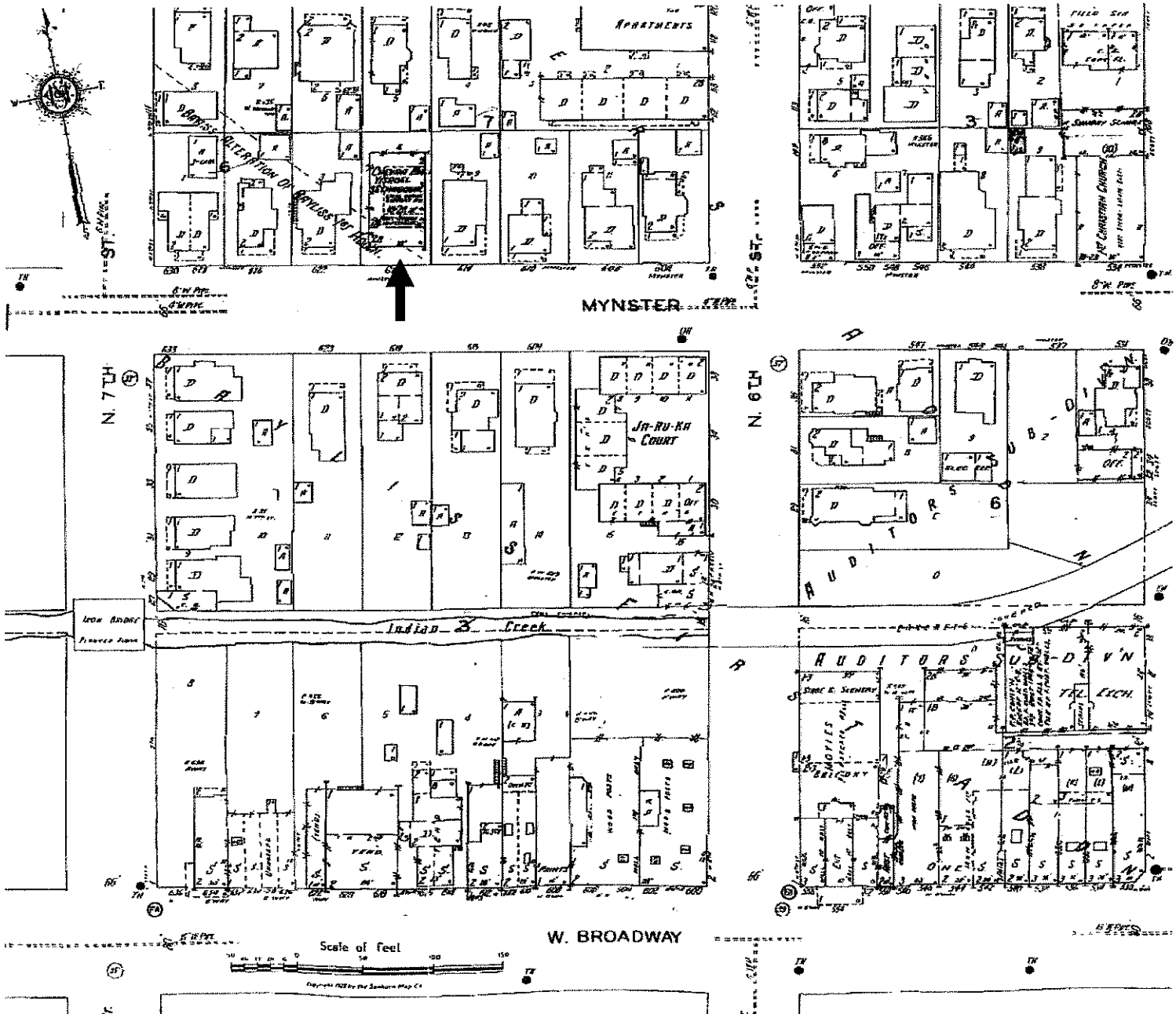


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Additional Section number Documentation Page 16 Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

1962 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showing location of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

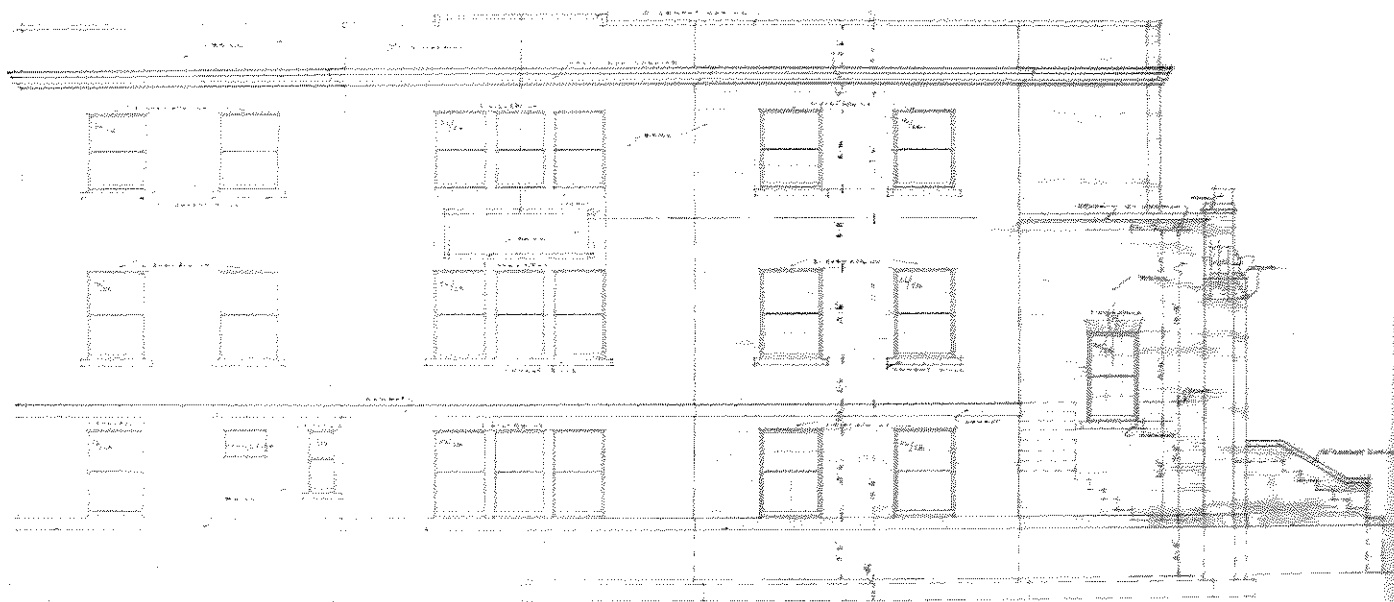
Section number Additional Documentation Page 17

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa



Front (South) Elevation



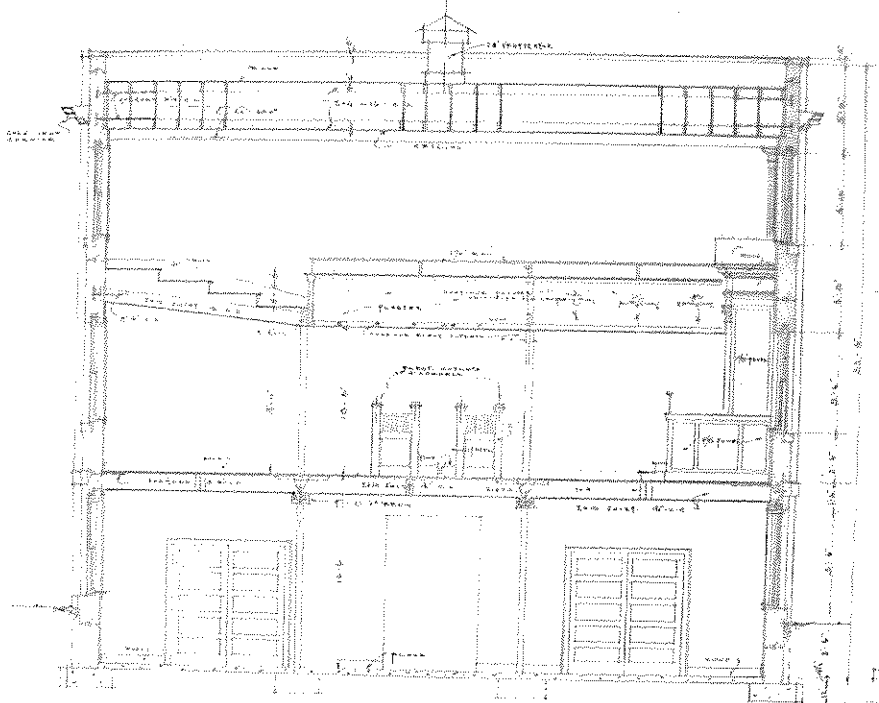
West Elevation

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

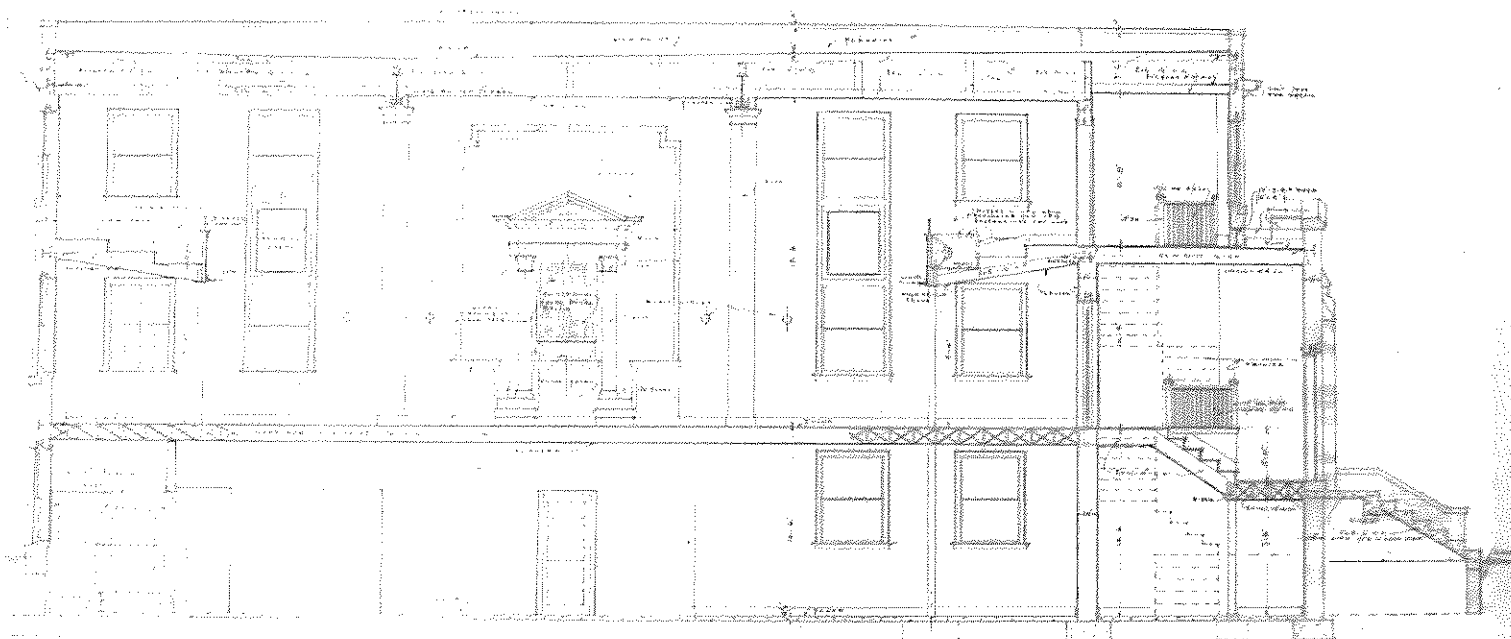
National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number Additional Page 18 **Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue**
Pottawattamie County, IA

1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa



Interior Cross-Section Looking North



Longitudinal Cross-Section Looking East

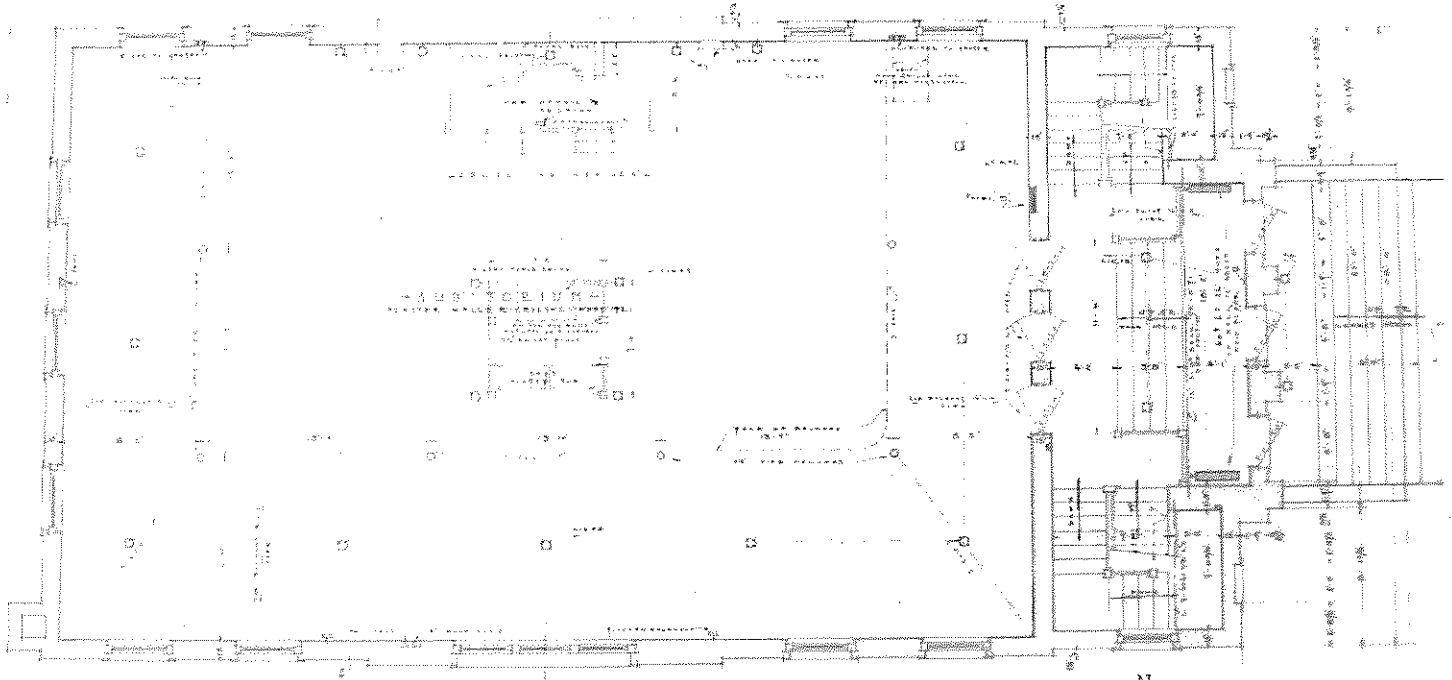
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

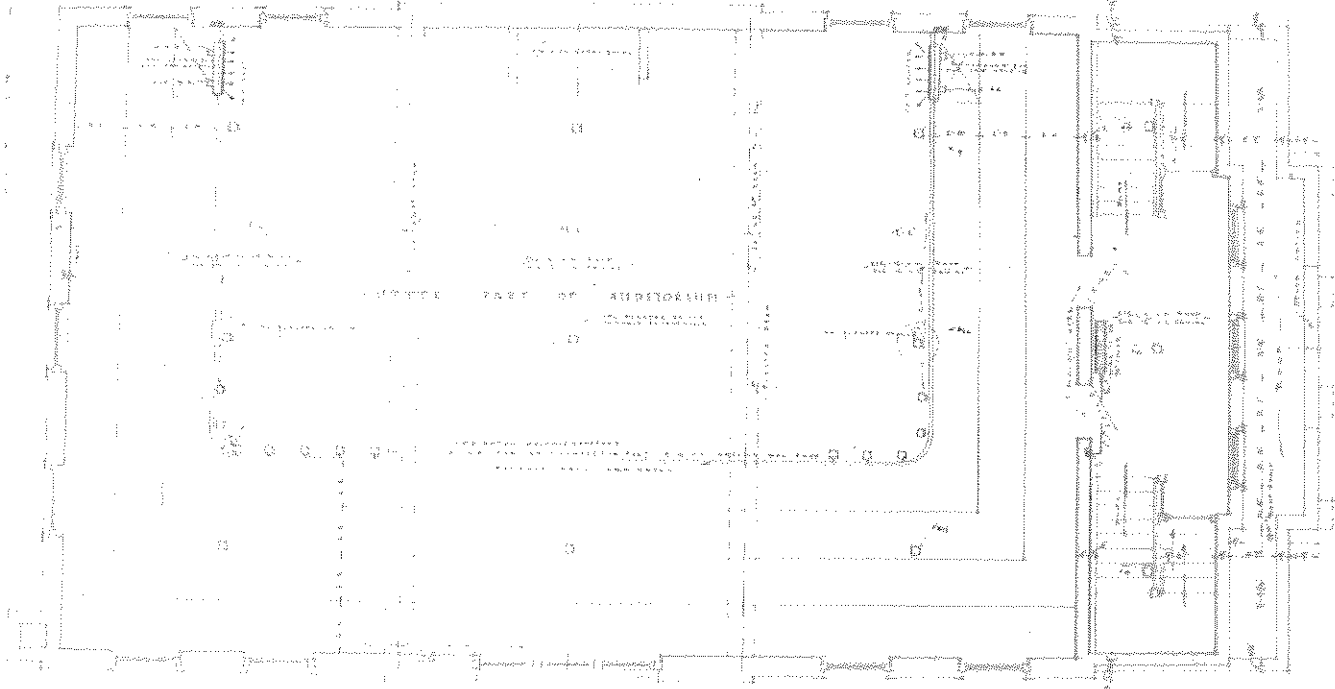
Section number Additional Page 19
Documentation

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa



Original Main Floor Plan



Original Balcony Level Floor Plan

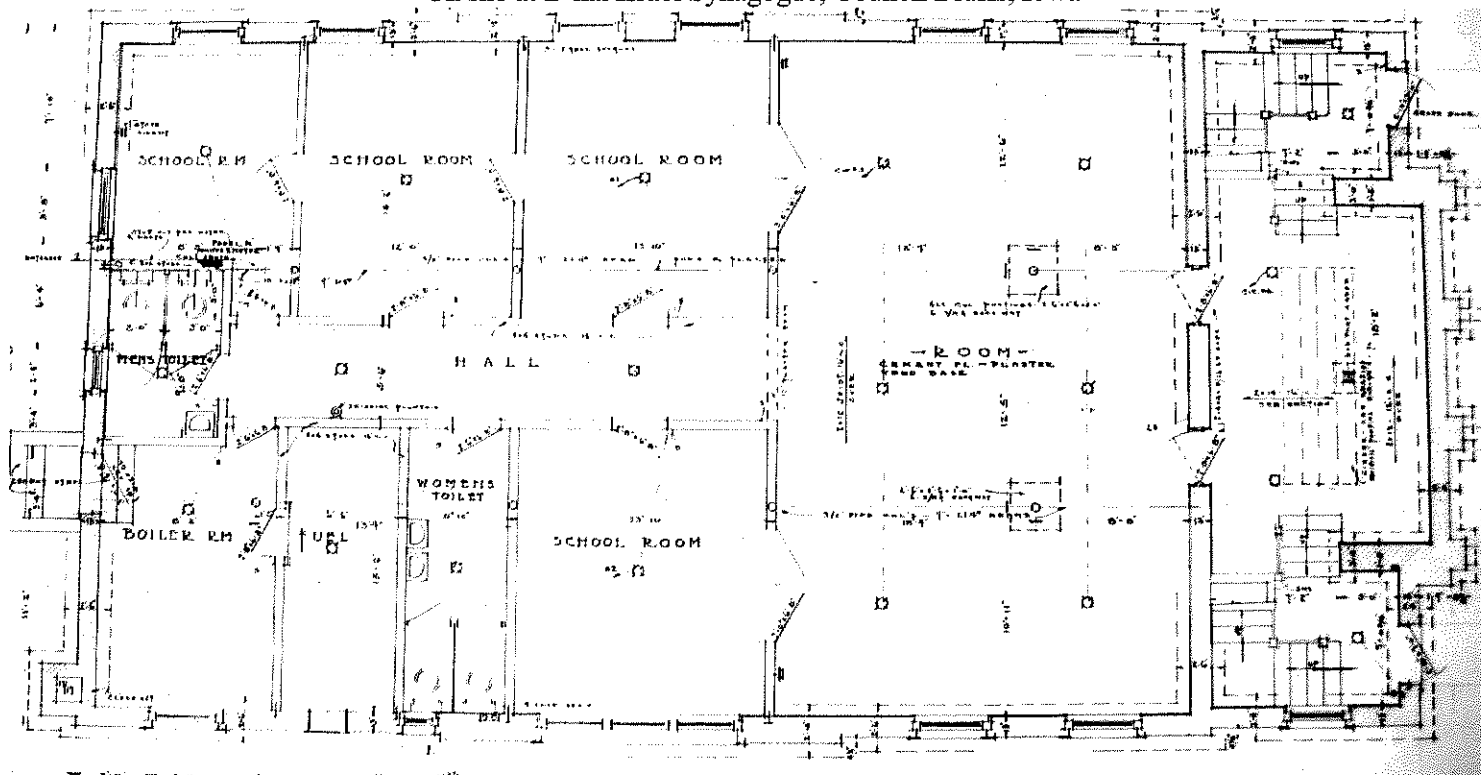
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

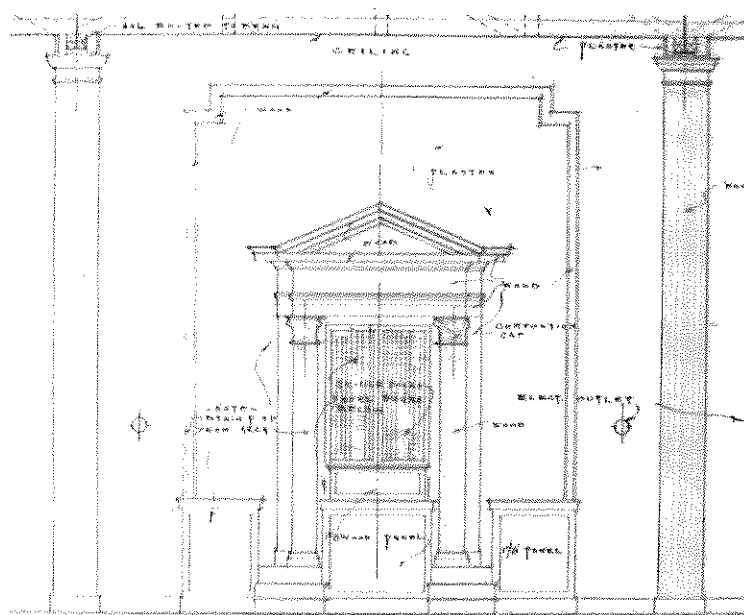
Section number Additional Documentation Page 20

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa



Original basement floor plan



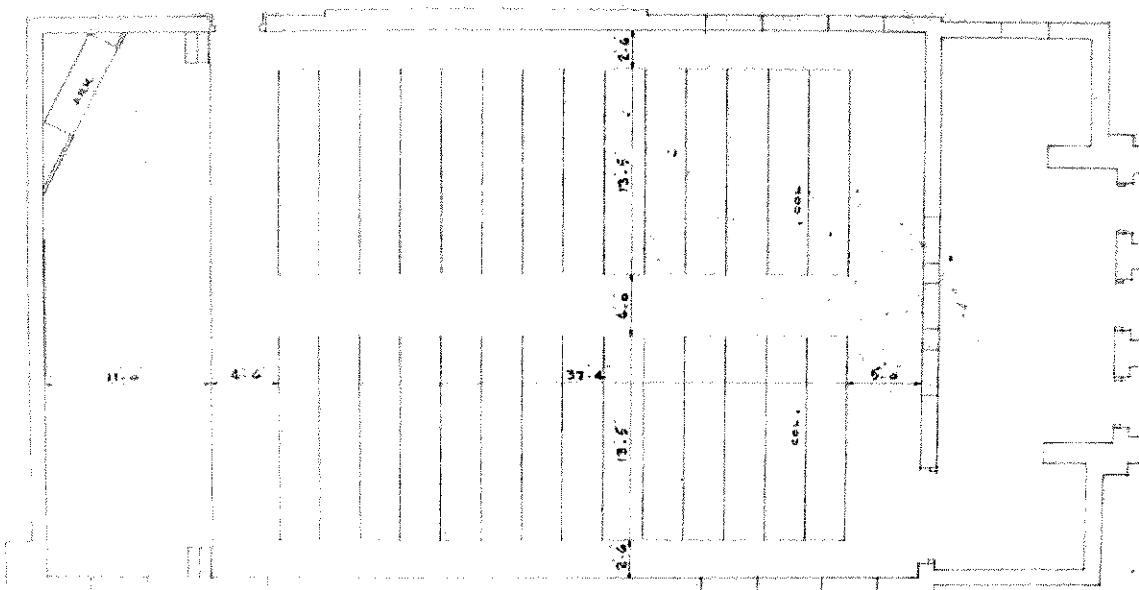
Detail of original ark on east wall of sanctuary looking East

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

Section number Documentation Page 21

Early 1960s Blueprints of Remodeling of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, I.T. Carrithers
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa



Final Remodeling Plan for Main Level of Sanctuary. Also Current Configuration of Interior.

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

Design for Wall of New Addition showing Star of David pattern looking East

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Additional Documentation Page 23

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

Additional Interior Photographs taken April 17, 2006



Original 1930 metal-framed seats in south balcony, View to the West



Wooden benches on main floor of sanctuary dating from the 1960s remodeling, View to the SE

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number Additional Documentation Page 24

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

Additional Interior Photographs taken April 17, 2006



Chapel in 1960s addition, View to the East



Social Hall in basement underneath sanctuary, View to the South

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number Additional Documentation **Page** 25

**Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA**

Photographs

Name of Property: Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
County and State: Pottawattamie County, IA
Photographer: Leah D. Rogers
Date of Photograph: April 17, 2006
Location of Original Negative: Tallgrass Historians L.C., Iowa City, IA

- #1 General view of property, View to the North
- #2 General view of property, View to the NE
- #3 Synagogue, View to the NW
- #4 Synagogue, View to the West
- #5 Synagogue, View to the NW
- #6 Detail of façade of Synagogue, View to the WNW
- #7 Interior of sanctuary, View to the South from podium showing south balcony
- #8 Interior of sanctuary, View to the North from balcony with ark doors open showing Torah scrolls

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number Additional Documentation Page 26

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

Map Showing Direction of Photographs

